



DOOMING OF THE CRITICAL ACADEMIC: THE CASE OF WILLING VICTIMS AND CURATED ONSLAUGHTS

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ABSTRACT

This commentary is an experiential-investigative account highlighting a systemic undermining of Higher Education as a space for freedom of thought and critique as orchestrated by inter alia promotion policies and an external referencing of academics' pursuits as 'relevant or otherwise'. The commentary illustrates and questions the normalization of willing submissions to system-induced demands of academic practice and the creation of academic spaces as emotionally fragile spaces dotted with anxieties, fears, and insecurities. The commentary draws upon the author's experience of Higher Education in two geographically and culturally diverse educational contexts namely, the UK and India.

KEYWORDS: Higher Education, Promotion Policies, India, United Kingdom, Academic Practice, Academic Spaces.

INTRODUCTION:

The last year and a half in my life as an academic have been, to say the least, intellectually eventful. In the time gone by, I, a mid-career academic from India took a year-long sabbatical from my job as a teacher educator in a reputed Indian university to travel to the United Kingdom on a prestigious scholarship. I spent this year at a 'top-ranked' institute of education pursuing higher education.

While I left the designation of being a practicing academic behind to gleefully slip into the shoes of a student once again, I soon realised that the academic in me failed to leave the habit of reflecting, critiquing and problematizing the structures, processes and discourses that make up our education systems. This intellectual inclination led me to the observation that my trysts and travails as a mid-career HE professional were remarkably similar to those of my counter parts in UK.

Amidst quite a few thought-provoking similarities, the one which unsettled me the most was the systemic structuring of the HE landscape to mitigate the existences of impassioned, critical and idiosyncratic Higher Education practitioners. The effort increasingly seems to be on the creation and sustenance of a template of an amnesiac academic who while being effortlessly attuned to neoliberal agendas of education forgets that Higher Education is foremost a space for dissent and debate, of critique and criticality and has for its agenda the nurturing of audacity to seek answers from the state and its structures (Kumar, 2017).

I for one may myself be on the verge of becoming an amnesiac. I am apprehensive of soon forgetting my Dharma as a Higher Education academic. (Dharma; is understood as 'the defining essence'). Still some steps away from this system-induced amnesia, I for the time being do recognise my Dharma as leading myself and my students on to the freedom road; freedom of thought, freedom from ideological subservience, freedom to question knowledge, question discourses and their in your face advocates.

But, as I said, I might soon forget this...because like a couple of my counter parts in the UK, I am gearing up to apply for promotion to the next glorious cadre in the academic hierarchy of Lecturers, Readers and Professors.

The Indian and UK academics: Their Fears and Travails Detailed

To share where this fear stems from, I bode you to picture my world for a moment. So, I am a HE practitioner from India (teacher educator to be precise).

The promotion policies of HE academics in the Indian Higher Education landscape are laid down by the University Grants Commission (UGC); which has the twin mandate of 'providing funds and that of coordination, determination and maintenance of standards in institutions of higher education' (UGC, 2017). In 2010, the UGC introduced a Point-Based Assessment System (PBAS) predicated on pre-determined Academic Performance Indicators (henceforth APIs) for promotions in and direct recruitment to Higher Education Institutions to be applied from retrospective effect (UGC, 2010). These Indicators were classified under three categories namely:

Category I: Teaching, Learning and Evaluation Related Activities

Category II: Professional Development, Co-Curricular and Extension Activities, and

Category-III: Research and Academic Contributions

A closer study of the PBAS highlights several lacunae vis: inter alia a systemic relegation of teaching-learning activities as subordinate to research and administrative responsibilities for direct recruitments, an attempt at quantification and delimiting of teaching in terms of verifiable number of hours, non-recognition of teacher-student interactions outside the lecture hall as a relevant educational engagement, and a systemic compulsion on publishing research only in journals that feature in UGC approved list (which has glaring omissions) and, a constantly changing and thus arbitrary stipulation of the minimum amount of research grant an academic must receive for it to be considered towards API score count (so one of my project funded in GBP is not counted because the prevalent exchange rate was unfavourable). The academic casualties of these stipulations have been shocking at worst and disturbing at best.

It comes as little surprise then that since its introduction the PBAS regulations have been amended four times, with the latest amendments being as recent as in 2016. University Teacher associations who have been 'up in arms across the country since 2010' have routinely called for its roll-back (ToI, 2016). See also ToI, 2013; The Indian Express, 2016) without any success in real terms despite the assertion that the PBAS is flawed to the core when seen from the lens of the ontological-epistemological underpinnings that we would ideally have underlining Higher Education. (see for example works of Barnett, 1990; White, 1997 etc.). Despite the loud hue and cry, the average Indian academic has chosen to be pragmatic rather than foolishly idealistic. Little surprise then that the homepages of various Indian origin journal websites broadcast the word UGC-equivalent in bold fonts!

Interestingly, my year-long interactions with UK counterparts made me realise that both the tapestry and travails are similar in the UK too. The evolving picture in the UK is one of an increasingly business-like university with ever-growing student numbers (Kinman and Jones, 2003). Not surprising then that a Universities UK funded report (2007) observed evidence of a systemic undermining of the aims of HE as promoting critical thought as there has been a growing emphasis on the articulation of learning outcomes and the value of these to students' future (working) lives (CHERI, 2007, p. 10). Aviram (1997) had referred to this as a service station concept of university. This macro-context has seen the HE academics reeling under the pressures to keep abreast with and perform in line with 'a growing number of mechanisms within UK higher education through which relevance (of teaching and research) is assessed and promoted' (2007, p.10).

One can identify with the mounting pressures on these over-burdened UK academics to balance teaching, research and administrative responsibilities. (CHERI, 2007, Kinman et al. 2003).

Inter alia, one identifies with the damaging effects of externally imposed definitions of 'relevance' (in case of both UK and India) placed on academics. One casualty of this is the reduction in the quality of and available real time for human and humane student-teacher or teacher-teacher interactions. Another is the undermining of HE as a space for dissent and free critique and the dissipation of opportunities for launching serious academic challenges to status quo and still flourish.

CONCLUSION:

Increasingly the road towards professional success has ceased to overlap with the road towards free and critical thought. For instance, the road to promotions is pretty much laid down for me and my colleagues in the UK from start to finish: in terms of the spots to be covered and the time it should take. Our academic jour-

neys are now...rushed! We meander through arduous tracks, emotionally and often ethically.

The road to promotions is no idyllic landscape of yore, it no more allows slowing down for a random conversation with a fellow traveller: seasoned or novice. Nor does it allow us, the academics a leisurely detour in either the anticipation or the search of a gushing academic motivations. The road to promotions does not seek an audacious traveller but a non-resenting, never critical routine-tourist on an already overcrowded bus.

The instances of academic grimacing have been thankfully mitigated as the transition from being organically critical and questioning to quietly conniving has been reinforced by the relevant statutory structures with applause-worthy consistency (and promotions for those planning their journeys in absolute consonance with what gets external validation). Needless to say that being the amnesiac academic already seems to be the right thing to do. Add to this the powerful phenomena of 'historical amnesia masterfully harnessed by the systemic structures', and soon the already marginal discourse of HE as a space for dissent will become a myth: one that fascinates but does not and cannot exist (Sadgopal, 2017).

I fear that my current predicament may soon enough be an illustration of the above.

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